



VERSAILLES REVISITED

The clients wanted a European garden in Westchester, and that's just what they got. See how it came to life.

BY TOVAH MARTIN
FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDRE BARANOWSKI

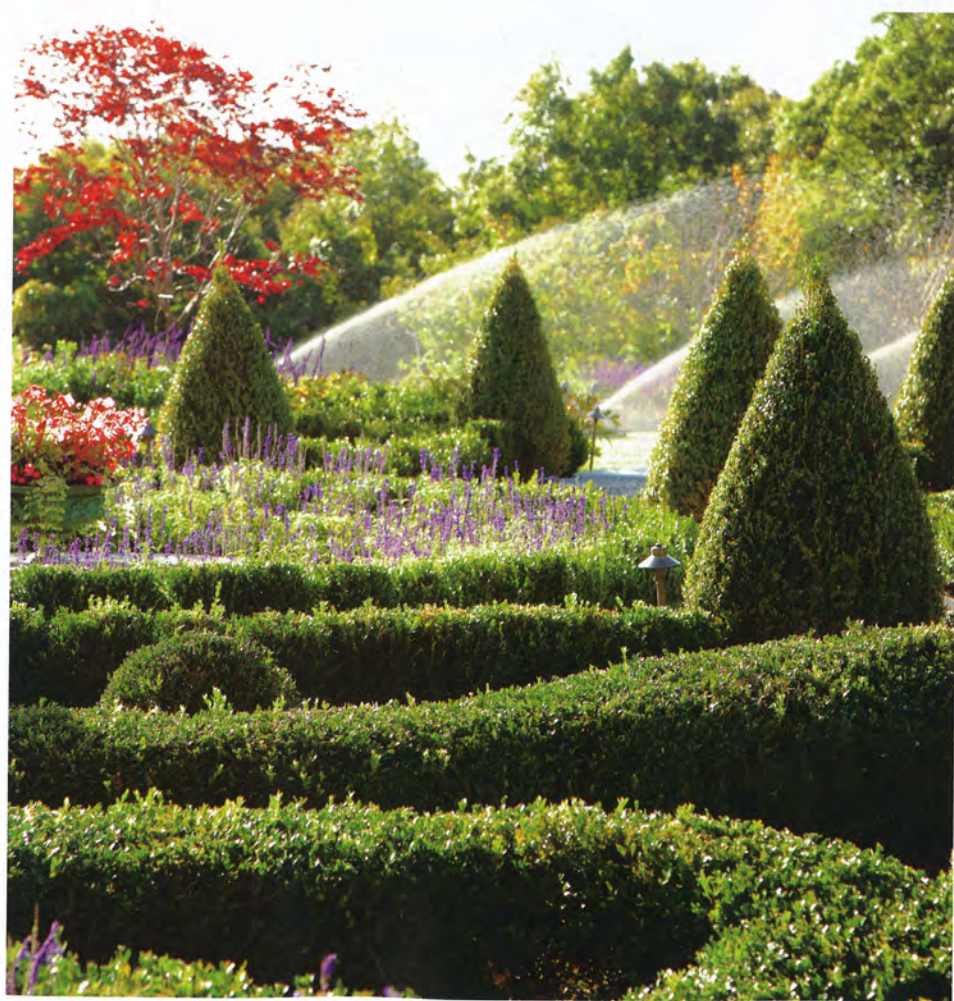


What do you plant beside a castle? John Conte came up with a brilliantly fitting answer to that tough assignment.

No stranger to regal homes, Conte knows how to complement the commanding presence of an Old World house. Given turrets, bold stonework, and elegant appointments, he figured that a sweeping view of a landscape with historic roots was the way to go. If that landscape lay like a broadloom and read from a distance, all the better. He wanted to create something with tidy lines, definable contrast, and elegant curves. A swirling parterre of clipped greenery was just the ticket.

The homeowners contacted landscape architects Conte & Conte to submit a design proposal for their Armonk property at the perfect juncture. The year was 2014, and John and Kimberly Conte, the husband-wife principals of the firm, had just returned from a whirlwind tour of English gardens. During their travels, the couple visited Sissinghurst Castle, Kew Gardens, Wisley, Hestercombe, Hidcote Manor Garden, and several other legendary British landscapes. "We rented a car, so we could see them all," he recalls.

They beheld mirror borders and perennials galore. They promenaded through axes and strolled past geometric knot gardens. They got





a double dose of symmetry and a lifetime's lesson in focal points. They were impressed, inspired, and enlightened. But little did they know that a quiz waited when they returned home.

Meanwhile, another couple had lovingly restored a commanding stone home in Armonk. Their pool house was recently completed, and they needed a landscape that would bring the side yard adjacent to the addition into the visual dialogue.

On the recommendation of Murphy Brothers—builder of the pool-house project—John Conte was invited to present a proposal. With English gardens fresh in his mind, the request was particularly timely. The clients' primary request was for something suitably European, in keeping with the prevailing architectural style on-site. Taking his cues from the house and its Old World grandeur, Conte came up with a plan that merged a French parterre with a traditional English border to give his clients the full European experience. The result is both grand and voluptuous, with a no-holds-barred ambiance.



The property totals 20 acres, with a long, leisurely tree-lined drive leading to the house. The team of professionals at Conte & Conte focused their plan and three-dimensional renderings

on four acres of gardens. "It was a big, empty lawn," Conte recalls. "It presented the perfect stage to make something wonderful happen."

Fueled with ideas from his trip, Conte and his team pulled together the winning design. In the shadow of the house, they created the "wow" moment using boxwoods of varying sizes to craft parterre quadrants in the French style. By clipping identical feathered paisley shapes swirling within beds of brick-red gravel, Conte masterminded a scene that has visual impact throughout the seasons—not only is it heart-stopping in summer, the presentation is even more dramatic with a light dusting of snow.

Ribbon-clipped boxwoods form edging around each quadrant with sentinel cone-sheared boxwoods accenting turning points. To make that moment happen, 800 boxwood plants were enlisted. In the center of it all, a fountain gushes to form a skirt of water spilling into a circular pond. Rising above the water, a verdigris urn displays colorful annuals. Perennial flowering sages, *Salvia nemerosa* "East Friesland" and *Salvia nemerosa*





"Caradonna," surround the urn in an ocean of waving blue spires throughout much of the summer. When the salvias are clipped in July, they rebloom later in the season.

For the full European experience, Conte hemmed the French parterre and sweeping lawn with a mixed English perennial border designed to perform throughout the growing season. To create color nonstop, his team came up with a configuration that starts in spring with alchemilla, baptisia, peonies, Oriental poppies, euphorbia, and Siberian iris. By mid-season, those perennials are joined by *Nepeta*, *Veronicastrum*, *Geranium*, *Phlox*, hardy hibiscus, and *Artemisia*. As a finale, *Helenium*, *Aster*, *Crococsmia*, and *Sedum* come into prime.

The limited list of plants keeps mainte-



nance in check. The plant selection also brings the color dialogue to the periphery of the scene, balancing the hues of annuals planted in the riveting containers featured throughout.

In addition to the planted areas, the homeowners requested that a large area remain open for entertaining events. Given that directive, Conte factored in sufficient lawn area to serve as a footprint for a 60- to-80-foot tent hemmed by a necklace of flowering cherry trees underplanted with shade-tolerant perennials. The result is lawn with a role.

What could have been throwaway space was also brought into service. Immediately outside the pool area, the land slopes off dramatically. Rather than lose that space, Conte graded a terrace to hold lines of tea roses in Wheaton granite boxes. When the roses are in full swing, the scent fills the air to tingle

yet another sense. A statue of Cupid cavorts in the center of the scene, and arches of "New Dawn" roses segment the space, signaling the change in mood and providing a sense of enclosure.

Appropriate accessories are critical in keeping a European-style landscape from becoming lost in translation. In unison with the European mood, Lutyens teak benches are placed where those who wish to sit can admire the view along the wide walkways. With antique craftsman urns, fountains, statues, and accents at important intervals, the garden has just the right grandeur to speak with its home.

Carefully wrought, painstakingly maintained, and deeply appreciated by the client, the garden is a resounding success. "This was a dream project," Conte proudly asserts. ■■■